



Northumberland

County Council

FAMILIES AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

2ND MARCH 2023

Safeguarding Activity Trends and Benchmarking Report

Report of Cabinet Member: Guy Renner-Thompson, Lead Member for Children's Services
Joint Interim Director of Children's Services, Graham Reiter and Audrey Kingham

Purpose of report

To provide analysis of trends within social work activity in responding to safeguarding concerns regarding Northumberland's children and young people; highlighting key indicators of performance, with comparisons to national and regional variations.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Committee:

- 1) Identify any issues for further scrutiny.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the 'Living and Learning' priority included in the Corporate Plan 2021-2024 and the inequalities priority as work is undertaken with some of the most vulnerable children in Northumberland

Key Issues

1. Re-referrals to children's social work services remain low, indicating the right service at the right time, and that families can sustain the successes that led to case closure.
2. A small proportion of child and family assessments were taking longer than 45 working days to be completed in the second and third quarter of 2022. This was due to staff sickness and a lack of agency staff; performance has since improved to the expected level.
3. Where children are at risk of significant harm, cases are responded to appropriately and in a timely manner. Where children are subject to a child protection plan, these are reviewed regularly, with very small numbers of plans lasting longer than two

years.

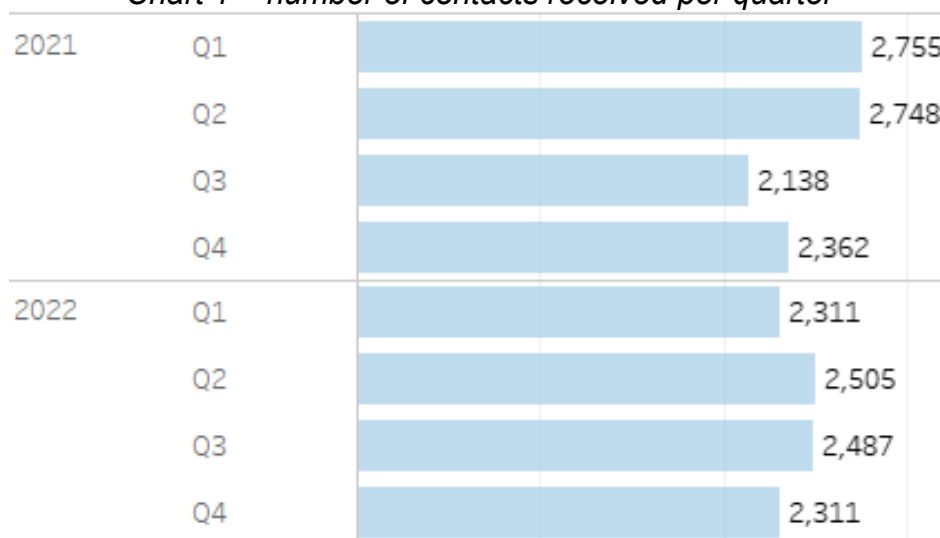
4. Numbers of children in care increased across the first half of 2022 but have levelled off in the second half of the year. Despite the increase, Northumberland continues to have the lowest rate of children in care in the region.
5. Indicators of placement stability for children in care are currently a challenge, although a recent audit of placement reasons shows that a significant proportion of recent placement moves were for positive reasons, for example a child moving into a long-term placement or returning home.

Background

TRENDS WITHIN THE SAFEGUARDING PROCESS

1. Northumberland children's services established their 'front door' in 2017, which in a social care context, is an arrangement where professionals gather information and make decisions about which pathways to follow with regards to the health, well-being, and safety of children.
2. In the most recent inspection of children's social care services in 2020¹, Ofsted praised Northumberland's safeguarding processes, including the 'front door' by saying that children's needs were identified promptly and that decision-making from the first point of contact was robust and proportionate to need. The report also stated that partner agencies work well together meaning that the next steps for the children and families are well considered.
3. Within the realms of the 'front door', an initial 'contact' is when an organisation or individual gets in touch with them about a child. This contact can sometimes be a request for general advice, or a request for a service in the form of a 'referral'. A referral, as defined by Department for Education (DfE) is 'a request for services to be provided by local authority children's social care'

Chart 1 – number of contacts received per quarter

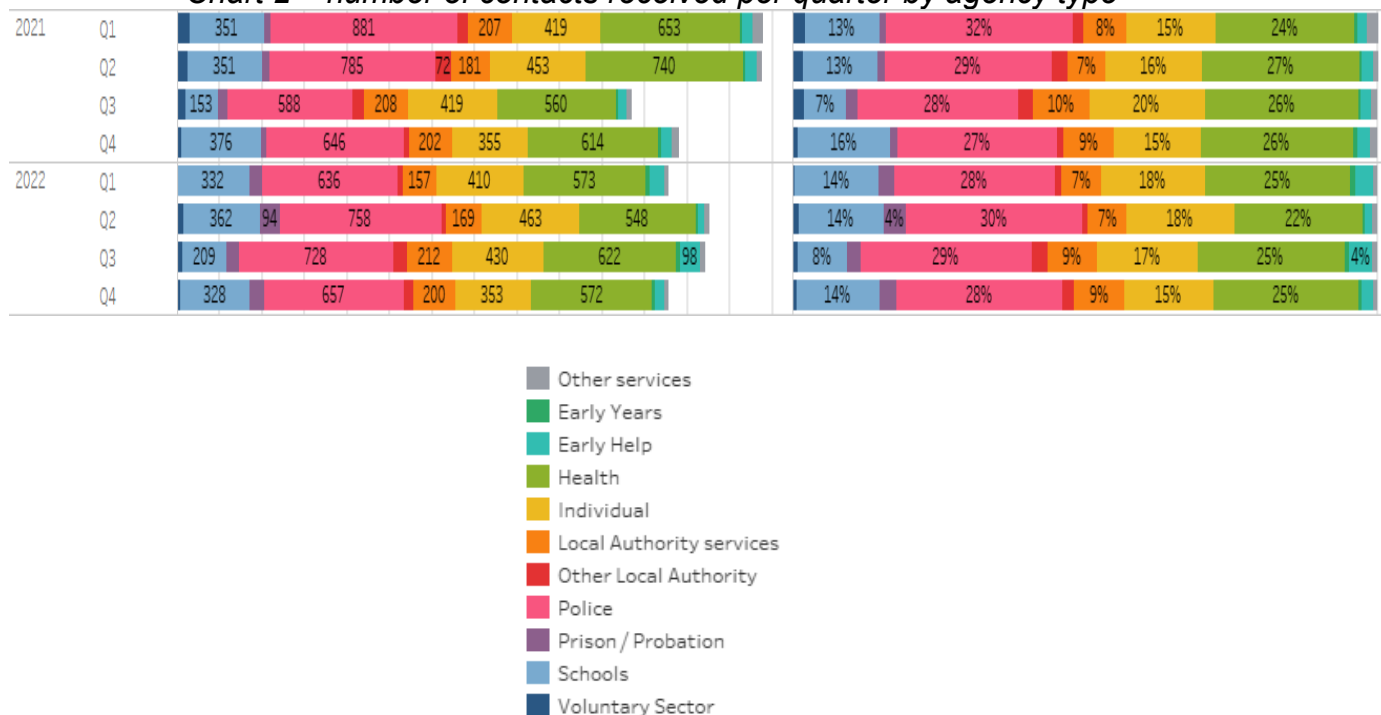


4. Chart 1 shows the number of contacts received per quarter between January 2021 and December 2022. The numbers received have been fairly consistent: there is usually a dip in Q3 due to the school summer holidays (as seen in 2021), however in 2022 there was an increased number of contacts from Health and Local Authority services which 'cancelled out' the reduced number of contacts from Schools.
5. Chart 2 shows the proportion of contacts from each agency type. Typically, contacts from the police account for the highest proportion, followed by contacts from Health

¹ Children's services inspection report, 20th March 2020
<https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50147382>

(includes GPs, health visitors, hospital), then contacts from 'individuals' (relatives, friends, neighbours and anonymous sources) and then those contacts from schools. Completing the top five sources are contacts from 'Local Authority services', which includes those from colleagues in Adult Social Care or Housing as well as contacts from social workers within the locality teams.

Chart 2 – number of contacts received per quarter by agency type



6. Over the course of 2022, Northumberland's 'front door' received 13,650 contacts in total for 9,283 children living within 5,496 households. Of the total contacts, 9,614 of these (70%) were triaged by social work services, with the remainder being directed towards early help services².
7. From the 9,614 contacts triaged by social work services in 2022, 31% of these (2,973) converted to a referral – which is a similar proportion to 2021 (28%) and slightly above the latest national figure of 24%³. 2,973 referrals, when equated to the most recent child population figures in Northumberland⁴, gives a rate of 508 referrals per 10,000 children: below the latest national figure (2021/22) of 538 and the latest regional figure (2021/22) of 644.
8. One of the national performance indicators that is monitored closely within children's services is the proportion of repeat referrals (re-referrals) within twelve months of a previous referral. To count as a re-referral, the case must have been open to a social worker previously but is now closed. New information about a child

² Early Help is about working with children, young people and their families who would like support. It is a consent-based service which involves the whole family and their Networks to come up with solutions to any difficulties or challenges experienced at the time.

³ ADCS Safeguarding Pressures Phase 8 2021/22 – <https://adcs.org.uk/sageguarding/article/safeguarding-pressures-phase-8>

⁴ Latest estimate of under 18 year olds is 58,428

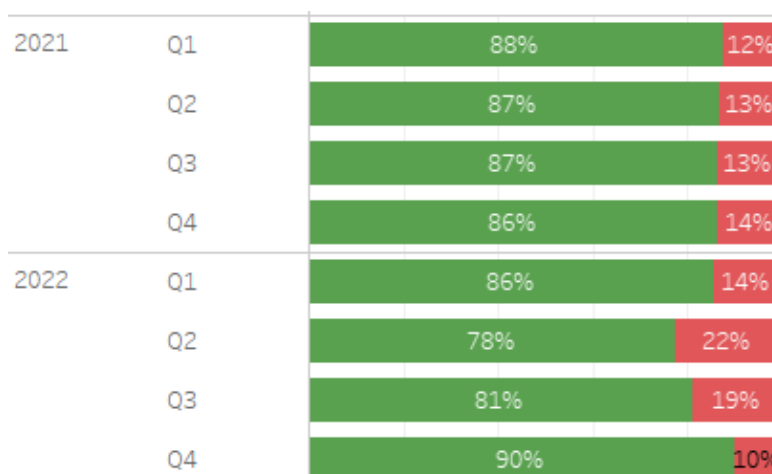
who is part of an already open case does not constitute a new referral for the purpose of this indicator.

*Chart 3 – number and proportion of re-referrals within 12 months
blue indicates re-referrals*

Year	Quarter	Re-referrals	Total Referrals	Proportion (%)
2021	Q1	117	568	17%
	Q2	101	609	14%
	Q3	91	461	16%
	Q4	133	612	18%
2022	Q1	106	636	14%
	Q2	104	636	14%
	Q3	92	587	14%
	Q4	154	658	19%

9. Chart 3 shows that the proportion of re-referrals in Northumberland each quarter has consistently been below 20%. The overall calendar year figure for 2022 was 15% (compared to 16% in 2021). This relatively low figure is generally seen as a positive reflection on children receiving the right service at the right time, and that when cases are closed, families can sustain the successes that led to case closure without ongoing social worker support. The national and regional re-referral figures in 2021/22 were 22% and 21% respectively.
10. The vast majority of referrals (99%) lead to an assessment by a social worker within the 'front door'. The child and family (C & F) assessment was introduced across England in March 2014, and it allows social workers to gather information about a child and their family in order to assess what services are needed, and who should provide them. There is an expectation that this assessment should be completed within 45 working days of the referral being accepted.

*Chart 4 – proportion of 'front door' assessments completed within 45 working days
Green = within 45 working days, red = over 45 working days*

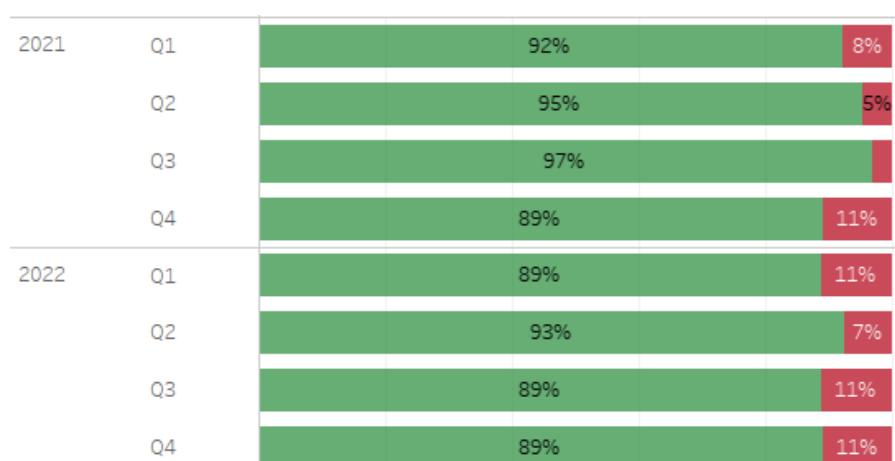


11. Chart 4 shows that performance with regards to assessments being completed by the 'front door' dipped slightly in the second and third quarters of 2022 with 78% and 81% being completed within the 45 working days respectively, before improving to 90% in the final quarter of the year. Overall, performance reduced from 87% in

2021 to 83% in 2022, which is just below the latest national and regional figure of 84%. The main reason behind the dip in performance was staff sickness which led to less worker availability coupled with a lack of suitable agency staff to cover.

12. Where the information gathered during a contact, referral or assessment results in the social worker suspecting that a child is suffering (or likely to suffer) significant harm, a strategy discussion meeting should be held to determine whether to initiate enquiries under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989. A multi-agency assessment is the means by which Section 47 enquiries are carried out and this should be completed within a maximum of 15 working days.
13. Citing the inspection report from 2020, Ofsted praised Northumberland’s approach to child protection concerns, stating that where identified, they were swiftly progressed for consideration by a multi-agency group of professionals. In 2022, Northumberland completed 1,134 Section 47 enquiries, which equates to a rate of 194 per 10,000 children – slightly above the national rate of 180 and below the regional rate of 267.
14. If the outcome of a Section 47 enquiry concludes that the original concerns were substantiated (meaning that the child is judged to be suffering (or likely to suffer) significant harm), then an Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) should be held within 15 working days of the date when the Section 47 enquiry was initiated. The purpose of the ICPC is to bring together family members, the child (where appropriate) and key professionals to share information, assess risks and then come up with an agreed way to keep the child safe. 59% (670) of the 1,134 children who were subject to a Section 47 enquiry in 2022 were subject to an ICPC – a higher proportion than the national figure of 34% and the regional figure of 36%. Although the figure is higher, Northumberland’s appliance of thresholds is scrutinised regularly through audit, which has given assurance that they are being applied appropriately and not intervening unnecessarily.

Chart 5 – proportion of ICPCs held within 15 working days of strategy discussion
Green = within 45 working days, red = over 45 working days

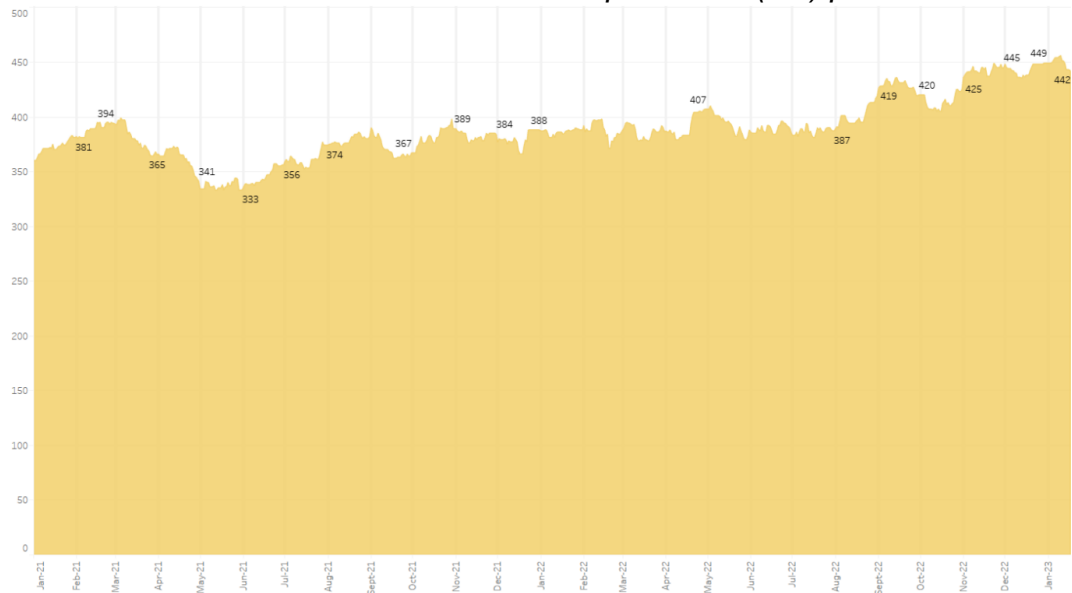


15. Chart 5 shows the timeliness of ICPCs held over the last eight quarters. Overall in 2022, 90% of ICPCs were held within 15 working days of the strategy discussion

being held, with this figure being better than the most recent national figure of 79% and the most recent regional figure of 85%.

16. Of the 670 children subject to an ICPC in 2022, 84% (563) commenced a child protection plan. This proportion is below the 2021 figure (91%) and is slightly below the latest national (87%) and regional (90%) averages. A child protection plan outlines the nature of the concerns, and sets out what needs to be done to ensure that the child is safe and prevent them from suffering further harm. Equating the 563 children to the under eighteen population gives a rate of 96 child protection plans starting per 10,000 children; a higher rate than the latest national rate (53), and the latest regional rate (87).
17. One way to look at the success of child protection plans is to monitor the proportion of children who are made subject to second or subsequent plans. A higher proportion of children with multiple plans would suggest that the decision to end a plan was premature or that the child protection process is not effective in bringing about lasting improvements for children. Of the 563 children who started a child protection plan in 2022, 24% (134) had previously had a plan, which is a similar rate to 2021. A figure of between 20% and 25% is generally deemed to indicate good performance on this indicator (as it is accepted that some children and families will enter the child protection threshold more than once, and often for different reasons). The latest national and regional figures are 23% and 21% respectively. This figure is closely monitored, with increases leading to a themed audit of cases to investigate whether plans were started appropriately.
18. During the course of a child protection plan, there are regular review conferences held to monitor how the plan is progressing, and if a child is judged to no longer be at continuing risk of harm then the plan will end. 99% of these reviews were held in timescale in Northumberland, compared to 89% across England and 90% in the North East. Across 2022, there were 501 child protection plans ended, which equates to a rate of 86 per 10,000 children – above the latest national figure of 52 and below the latest regional figure of 91. The duration of child protection plans can vary, but plans should aim to be completed within two years (although it is recognised that some children will need plans for longer than this). Of the plans that ended in 2022, 11 plans ended beyond two years (2%); comparing favourably to the national figure of 4% and in line with the regional figure of 2%.

Chart 6 – total number of child protection (CP) plans

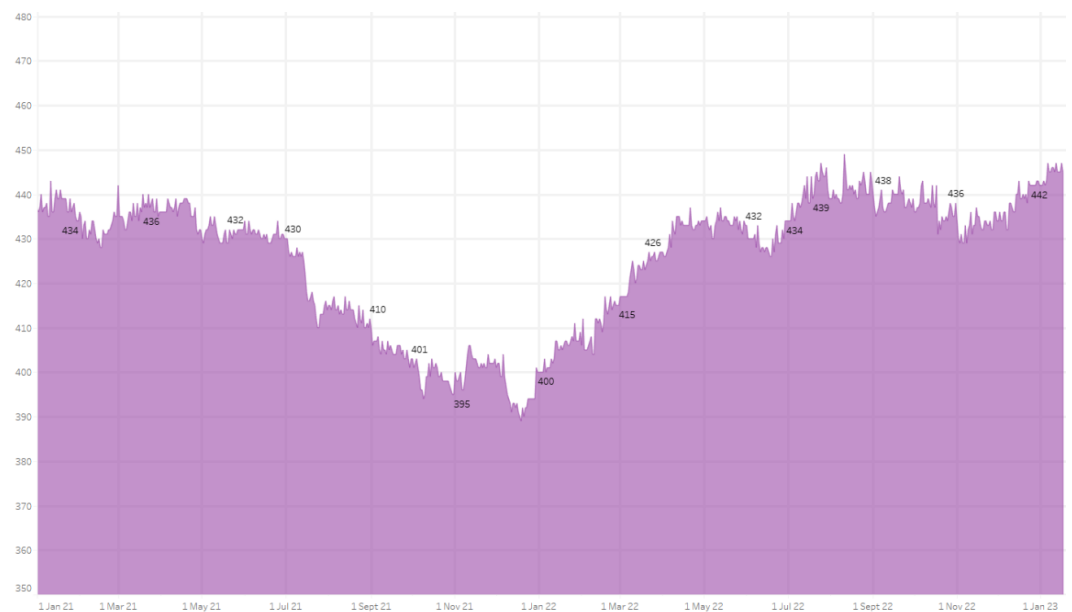


19. Chart 6 shows the total number of child protection plans since the start of 2021. Other than a slight reduction between March 2021 and June 2021, there has been a steady increase in the total number of child protection plans in Northumberland, with the figure at the end of December 2022 being 449. Converting this to a rate gives a figure of 77 child protection plans per 10,000 children; higher than the national rate of 42 and the regional rate of 63, but lower than the rate of 80 per 10,000 in March 2020.

CHILDREN IN CARE

20. Where it is necessary to take immediate action to protect a child, or where parents are unable to care for children (and there are no agreed alternative family to do this), a child may enter the care of the local authority.

Chart 7 – total number of children in care



21. Chart 7 shows the number of children who were being cared for by the local authority since the start of 2021. The numbers decreased from around 440 at the start of 2021 down to 390 at the end of 2021, and then have slowly increased back up to 442 at the end of December 2022. Converting this to a rate gives a figure of 76 children in care per 10,000.
22. The reasons behind the increase in children in care appear to point to a slow-down in the numbers of children leaving care in 2022; especially those who are adopted or made subject to a special guardianship order⁵ (SGO) from care. Numbers of children adopted reduced by 55% in 2022 (compared to 2021) and those children made subject to an SGO reduced by 29%. Both of these processes are reliant on court timetables which were very much impacted upon during the Covid pandemic. Despite the recent increase in Northumberland's rate of children in care, it remains the lowest in the region and is only slightly above the national rate of 70 (and well below the regional rate of 110).
23. A panel of senior managers meet regularly to assess and oversee the children who may need to enter care, and this 'gatekeeping' arrangement has been successful in accommodating children after suitable appropriate alternatives have been fully considered. For children who are in care, their plans for permanency are considered as part of the reviews held by an independent reviewing officer, and permanency clinics have been set up with social work team managers to monitor their progress.
24. Permanence in the context of children in care is defined in the Children Act 1989 as providing children with:
- 'a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity ... a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond'*
- Permanence can be reached through different pathways:
- a return to birth parents
 - shared care arrangements
 - permanence whilst in care as part of a residential placements, long-term unrelated foster carer or friends and family care
 - legal permanence via adoption, special guardianship or child arrangement orders
25. With regards to permanency for Northumberland's children in care, in the calendar year 2022, 13% (18) of the 143 children who left care were adopted; with this figure being higher than the national figure of 10% and in line with and regional figure of 13%. A further 19% of children who left care were subject to a special guardianship order (higher than the national average of 13%), with 35% of children returning home to birth parents (also higher than the national average of 28%).
26. Regarding children's plans for permanency, Ofsted visited Northumberland in July 2022 to undertake a focused visit on the arrangements for planning and achieving

⁵ A special guardianship order is usually granted to a family member. They take on parental responsibility for the child, allowing them to make parenting decisions in their interests, but without the separation of family ties that adoption may bring

permanence of children in care⁶. Their feedback was very positive: social workers know their children well and identify permanence plans at the earliest opportunity. Workers also use personalised tools to communicate effectively with children and prepare them for permanence, whilst an established quality assurance framework assists senior leaders and managers in monitoring children's plans and the quality of social work practice.

27. The stability of a child's placement is important to help them build security in their lives by developing secure attachments, to support their ability to form relationships in the future as adults, and also to help them develop a strong sense of belonging and identity⁷.
28. There are two indicators of performance that look specifically at placement stability. The first indicator looks at the proportion of children in care who have experienced three or more placements within the previous year. 14% of Northumberland's children in care experienced this number of placements at the end of December 2022. This is higher than the latest national and regional figure of 10%. A recent audit of placement moves showed that over half the children's most recent placement move was into a long-term placement.
29. The second indicator looks at the cohort of children below the age of 16 who have been in care for at least two and a half years. Of the children in the cohort, the indicator looks at the proportion who have been in the same placement for at least two years (or are living with prospective adopters). At the end of December 2022, Northumberland's figure was 64%: worse than the latest national average of 71% and regional average of 70%. Again, the audit of placement moves showed that almost two-thirds of the cohort had moved for positive reasons – with most either returning home or moving into a long-term placement.
30. As part of the children looked after (CLA) return that is submitted to the Department of Education, there are a number of annual 'outcome' indicators that are published. In the reporting year ending March 2022 (2021/22):
 - 86% of children in care were up to date with their immunisations (compared to 85% nationally and 86% regionally).
 - 71% of children in care had their teeth checked (compared to 70% nationally and 72% regionally).
 - 97% of children in care had an annual health assessment (compared to 89% nationally and 92% regionally).
 - 81% of children under five had an assessment of their development (compared to 89% nationally and 95% regionally).

⁶ Focused visit letter to Northumberland children's services, 31st August 2022

<https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50191898>

⁷ The Care Inquiry, "Making not Breaking – Building Relationships for our Most Vulnerable Children" – April 2013

- 5% of children in care had a substance misuse problem identified (compared to 3% nationally and regionally).
 - 1% of children in care aged ten or above were convicted or subject to a final warning or reprimand (compared to 2% nationally and regionally).
 - 8% of children in care had at least one missing episode (compared to 11% nationally and regionally) with an average of five missing episodes per child (compared to six on average nationally and seven on average regionally).
31. When children leave care after the age of 16, if they have been in care for at least thirteen weeks since the age of 14 then they become a 'care leaver'. Care leavers are young people who the local authority must continue to keep in touch with, maintain their pathway plan (a document that sets out how services will be provided to respond to young person's needed), and to help them achieve the goals within it. The support must go on until the young person turns 21 (or 25 if the young person wishes).
32. As part of the same CLA return submitted to the Department of Education, there are a number of indicators that monitor care leaver's outcomes across an older (19 to 21 year old) and younger (17 to 18 year old) cohort. In the reporting year ending March 2022 (2021/22):
- 95% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were in touch with their link worker (compared to 92% nationally and regionally).
 - 100% of care leavers aged 17 to 18 were in touch with their link worker (compared to 94% nationally and 93% regionally).
 - 95% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were living in suitable accommodation (compared to 88% nationally and 90% regionally).
 - 100% of care leavers aged 17 to 18 were living in suitable accommodation (compared to 90% nationally and 93% regionally).
 - 57% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were in employment, education or training in the period around their birthday (compared to 55% nationally and 52% regionally).
 - 70% of care leavers aged 17 to 18 were in employment, education or training in the period around their birthday period (compared to 66% nationally and 67% regionally).

Implications

Policy	Performance and monitoring of social work activity is a key part of safeguarding children.
Finance and value for money	Figures provided in this report allow officers and Members to monitor workloads and activity to ensure resources are allocated appropriately.
Legal	<p>The report includes information relating to children who are in care for whom the authority has corporate parenting responsibility, with a number of these being subject to care proceedings.</p> <p>The Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations 2000 confirm that the matters within this report are not functions reserved to Full Council.</p>
Procurement	None.
Human Resources	The council should continue to monitor the impact of resource investments with regards to workloads to ensure effective targeting to support staff and to improve performance. At present, there is a national focus on supervision, training and stress-levels of social workers.
Property	None.
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A	Social work does focus on the most vulnerable children and young in Northumberland.
Risk Assessment	Children's Services should prioritise and respond to children who are most at risk of significant harm.
Crime & Disorder	The prevalence of domestic abuse and substance misuse are monitored during case reviews, and influence workload management decisions.
Customer Consideration	The data in the report indicates the extent to which service user's needs are being met.
Carbon reduction	None.
Health and Wellbeing	The report highlights activity to safeguard children, which in the long-term will promote better health and wellbeing.

Wards	None.
--------------	-------

Background papers:

- Lord Laming – The Victoria Climbié Inquiry
- Lord Laming – The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report
Findings and recommendations of the Care Inquiry 2013
ADCS Safeguarding Pressures Report Phase 8
- Letter from Ofsted regarding their Focused visit to Northumberland children’s services (August 2022)

Report Sign Off

	Full Name of Officer
Monitoring Officer/Legal	Suki Binjal
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Jan Willis
Relevant Executive Director	Graham Reiter
Chief Executive	Rick O’Farrell
Portfolio Holder(s)	Guy Renner-Thompson

Author and Contact Details

Brian Smeaton – Children’s Improvement & Development Manager
brian.smeaton@northumberland.gov.uk / 07498236713